A FAMILY AFFAIR

BY HUGH CONWAY,

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CHAPTER I.

A LITTLE DERELICT.

It was a dreary, dismal, wintry afternoon. All the lights of Paddington Station were needed to conquer the damp fog which filled the arched expanse from end to end. The broad platform teemed with the motion and bustle attendant upon the departure of a train. The newspaper boys alone were having a comparatively dull time of it, as the first act of every passenger, upon taking his seat, was to pull up the window and shut out as much fog as possible, declining to let the sash down for any one, except other travelers, who, having paid their fares, claimed their right to seats in the train—a proceeding which, to the first installed passenger, always seems supremely selfish. The new comer, or comers, might choose some other compartment than his!

The moving rack which bears the lamps reached the extreme end of the train. The strong-armed official below hurled the last crystal globe to the nimble official who runs along the top of the carriages, and leaps so recklessly from one to another. Deft as an Indian juggler, he caught the gleaming missile, slapped it into the last socket, and sprang incontinently from the already moving train. The guard shut the last door, which somebody's carelessness had left open, jumped into his van as it swept by him, and, punctual to the minute, the five o'clock train left London and began its race to Penzance.

In one of the first-class compartments were three passengers, although the railroad company would only benefit to the extent of two fares, one of these passengers being a child still young enough to be passed off as a child in arms by all save, perhaps, those tender-minded persons who send conscience money to the chancellor of the exchequer. The two travelers who augmented the company's revenue were a man and a woman.

That they were strangers was evident, and it was also evident that the man was an old traveler. As soon as the train was in motion, and he felt insured for some time to come against disturbance, he arranged his wraps in the most approved fashion, donned a soft cap, lit a lamp and buried himself in a book. He was a young man; but as he appears in this tale only to disappear, a detailed description would be superfluous. It is enough to know he was a gentleman, well dressed, well-to-do in appearance, and looked quite in his place in a first-class carriage.

It was a different matter with the woman. There was no obvious reason why she should not be able and willing to pay threepence-halfpenny instead of a penny a mile for the privilege of being whisked to her destination; yet one could imagine a crusty old director, who travels free himself, and is therefore anxious to prevent the company from being defrauded, calling to a guard and suggesting that the woman's ticket should be examined. Or, from purely benevolent reasons, a person who knows what mistakes women make in such matters, might with propriety have remarked: "How comfortable these *first*-class carriages are." For my part, I should most certainly have done so—not from benevolence, but to save myself, who had paid just fare, from feeling swindled if, at the journey's end, a good-natured ticket collector let off the victim of such a comfortable mistake.

Yet there was nothing remarkable in the woman's appearance, except the utter absence of individuality it displayed. For any guidance her looks gave, she might have been rich or poor, young or old, beautiful or ugly, noble or simple. Had her traveling companion been as curious as he was at present indifferent about the matter, he might have sat opposite to her from London to the Land's End, yet not have known how to classify her. She was dressed in plain black—and black, like charity and night, covereth and hideth much. No scrap of bright ribbon, no vestige of color, broke the sombre monotony of her attire, and a thick black veil hid the upper part of her face. She sat like one in a thoughtful frame of mind. Her head was bent forward, and so threw her mouth and chin into the shade. Her hands being gloved, it was impossible to know whether she wore a wedding ring or not.

Pressed her lips upon the child's golden head.

Of the child, a little boy, there was nothing that could be seen except a mass of bright golden hair. The woman had wound a thick woolen shawl around him, and held him close to her bosom. He was no annoyance to any one, for, shortly after the train started, he fell fast asleep. Indeed, so inoffensive were his traveling companions, that the gentleman, who had felt somewhat disgusted when a woman and a child entered the compartment, began to hope that, after all, he need not shift his quarters at the first stoppage.

The train sped on through the white fog. It was a fast train, but not so fast as to give itself airs and decline stopping more than twice in a hundred miles. Near Reading the speed slackened. The gentleman with the book breathed an inward prayer that he might not be disturbed. He did not notice that, as the train drew up at the platform, the woman half rose from her seat, as if her journey was at an end; then, after a moment's hesitation, reseated herself in her former attitude. The travelers were not disturbed. The train shot on once more. Still the gentleman read his book—still the silent woman held the sleeping child.

In less than half an hour Didcot was reached. The woman, after a quick glance to assure herself that the reader was intent upon his book, pressed her lips upon the child's golden head, and kept them there until the train stopped. For a minute or two she remained motionless, then, laying the child on the seat, rose quickly and opened the carriage door. The reader looked up as the cold, damp air rushed into the heated compartment.

"You have no time to get out," he said "we are off in a minute."

If she heard the well-meant caution she paid no heed to it. She made no reply, but, stepping on to the platform, closed the carriage door behind her. The young man shrugged his shoulders, and resumed his interrupted paragraph. It was no business of his if a stupid woman chose to risk missing the train.

Although, two minutes afterwards, when he found the train in rapid motion, and himself and the sleeping child the only tenants of the compartment, he saw that, after all, he was primarily concerned in the matter. In spite of his warning the mother had been left behind, and he was in the unenviable position of having a child thrown upon his hands until the next stoppage.

Although he was a bachelor and one who knew nothing of the ways of children, he scarcely felt justified in pulling the emergency cord. Swindon would be reached in less than an hour—there he would be relieved. So he could do no more than anathematize the careless mother, and pray that the child's slumbers might be unbroken. Whatever effect the objurgation may have had, he soon saw that his prayer was not to be granted. The child, no doubt missing its protector's embrace, opened its eyes and began to struggle. It would have rolled off the seat had not its enforced guardian, who was a good-natured, kind-hearted young fellow, picked it up and transferred it to his knee.

He meant well, although he did not handle it very skillfully. A man must go through a course of painful experiences before he learns how to dandle a child properly. Our friend did his best, but so clumsily that the woolen shawl fell from the child, and disclosed a large ticket sewn on to the dress beneath. On it was written, "H. Talbert, Esq., Hazlewood House, Oakbury, near Blacktown." The young man applauded the good sense which had provided for a contingency which had really come to pass. Then he settled down to do the best he could towards supplying the place of the missing woman until the stoppage at Swindon might bring deliverance.

Swindon at last. Here the ill-used traveler called the guard, and, as that official is of course paid to undertake all sorts of delicate and unforeseen duties, with perfect fairness shifted all further responsibility on to his shoulders, resumed the perusal of his book, and troubled no more about the matter.

The guard, without disputing his position of guardian to all unprotected travelers, hardly knew what to do in the present emergency. The hope that the foolish mother had managed to get into another carriage was dispelled by her not making her appearance. He was also puzzled by the careful way in which the child was labeled. This guard had seen some curious things in his time, and, as the missing woman had left not a scrap of luggage behind, thought it not improbable that the desertion of the child was due to intention, not accident. At first he thought of leaving the tiny derelict at Swindon, on the chance that the mother would arrive by the next train from Didcot. But the more he thought the matter over the more convinced he felt that no mother would arrive by the next or any following train. Being himself a family man, and feeling most kindly disposed towards the little golden head which nestled in the most confiding way against his great brown beard, he decided to take the child on to Blacktown, and thence forward it as addressed. He pulled a couple of cushions out of a first-class carriage, put them in one corner of his van, and tucked up little Goldenhead as snugly as any mother could have done; so snugly and comfortably that the child at once closed its blue eyes and slept until the train reached Blacktown.

There the guard carried the little fellow into the refreshment room, and leaving him in charge of the pleasant young ladies, went to look for a sober yet speculative man who would take the child to Oakbury on the chance of being paid for his trouble. He even gave this man half a crown—to be repaid out of his prospective reward—for cab hire. Then, after another look at the little waif, who was drinking milk, munching a biscuit, and being made very much of by the refreshment room young ladies, our guard rushed back to his somewhat neglected duties, and was soon spinning down west at the rate of thirty-five miles an hour.

CHAPTER II.

A FAMILY OF POSITION.

Be it remembered that Oakbury is not Blacktown. Many of its inhabitants are greatly annoyed when they hear it called a suburb of Blacktown. Oakbury is near the large city, but not of it. Although the fact cannot be ignored that the existence of the many charming country houses which adorn Oakbury is as much due to its contiguity to the dirty thriving town as to its natural beauties—and although a certain proportion of those desirable residences has been purchased by Blacktown's successful traders, the most aristocratic inhabitants of Oakbury look with indifference on the good and evil fortunes of the city. They, the aristocratic inhabitants, are useful to Blacktown, not Blacktown to them. They are out of its dissensions and struggles; better still, beyond the range of its taxation. They are of the county, not the town. So they head their letters "Oakbury, Westshire;" and, as a rule, decline intimacy with any Blacktown trader under the rank of banker or merchant prince.

Besides Lord Kelston's well known country seat, there must be in the parish of Oakbury some 20 or 25 gentlemen's residences. They cannot be called estates, as the ground attached to each varies respectively from three to fifty acres, but not a few of them might lay claim to be described by that well-rounded phrase, dear to auctioneers and house agents, "a country mansion, fit for the occupation and requirements of a family of position." They are not new, speculative, jerry-built houses, but good, old-fashioned, solid affairs. No painted and gilt railings surround them; thick boundary walls and fine old trees hide them from the gaze of inquisitive holiday folks. As the country around is very beautiful and richly timbered; as the prevailing wind which blows across Oakbury comes straight from the sea, pure and uncontaminated; as two of the best packs of hounds in England meet within an easy distance; and, prejudice notwithstanding, as the conveniences offered by a large city are so close at hand—it is no wonder that the rector of Oakbury numbers many families of position among his parishioners. If mine were a family of position, it should most certainly occupy a pew in that fine, old square-towered church.

After this description it will be easily believed that the Oakbury people are somewhat exclusive—by the Oakbury people are meant the inhabitants of the aforesaid twenty houses; the manner of the villagers and other small fry who constitute the residue of the population need not be taken into account. The Oakbury people proper are very particular as to with whom they associate, and the most particular and exclusive of all are two gentlemen named Talbert, the joint owners and occupiers of Hazlewood House.

Their ultra-exclusiveness was but the natural outcome of the position in which they were placed. The fact that their income was derived from money made by their father in timber, tobacco, soap, sugar, or some other large industry of Blacktown—people have already nearly forgotten which it was—must be responsible for the care the Talberts were bound to exercise before they made a new acquaintance.

Because, you see, in their opinion at least, the taint of trade still clung to them. They were but a generation removed from the actual buying, selling and chaffering. Metaphorically speaking, their own father's hands had been hardened by the timber, stained by the tobacco, lathered by the soap, made sticky by the sugar, according to the particular branch of trade at which he had worked to such advantage. So it was that upon at-

Mr. Talbert, Merchant.

taining the earliest years of discretion, the sons decided that it was more incumbent upon them than upon the generality of persons to be particularly particular in their choice of friends. As they were amiable, right-feeling young men, they looked upon this duty as a sad necessity.

Had they been tempted to swerve from this line of conduct, respect for their father should have kept them steadfast. He had always impressed the great duty upon them. Before the two boys were out of the nursery the great coup which is expected by every sanguine business man came off. Mr. Talbert realized his capital and sold his business. He obtained less for it because he made the stipulation that his name should no longer appear in connection with it. Then, a widower with one daughter and two sons, he bought Hazlewood House, and settled down to drift gradually into good society.

He educated his children by this creed. It is the duty of all people to rise in the world—both in commercial and social circles. Thanks to his exertions and good fortune, the first half of the obligation had been discharged. The second rested chiefly with his children. He did not tell them this in definite words, but all the same preached it to them most eloquently, and was more than content, and felt that the fruits of his training were showing themselves, when his daughter married Sir Maingay Clauson, a fairly respectable and well-to-do baronet.

This satisfactory alliance gave the Talberts a lift in the social scale; although, so far as Oakbury was concerned, it was little needed. Mr. Talbert had now been out of business for at least ten years. He was quiet, gentlemanly, and, if not retiring, at least unobtrusive. His wealth was estimated at about three times its correct amount. With these advantages he already found himself well received by the families of position, his neighbors. Content as he no doubt felt on his own account, he, nevertheless, held up their sister's brilliant match as an example to his sons, and talked so much about the necessity of their choosing their intimates fittingly that it is a marvel the young men did not speedily develop into fools or snobs.

But even now when verging upon middle age they were neither—although any man who would decline your acquaintance or mine ought, of course, to be one or the other—perhaps both. The worst that could be urged against the Talberts was this: From the very first they had told themselves: "We can find as pleasant and as true friends among the upper ten thousand—among those who do not make their living by barter—as we can among commercial people. Let us therefore only associate with the best. A man has an undoubted right to choose his own friends. We shall not go out of our way to toady the great, but with our ideas on the subject we can only make associates of those whom we consider the proper class of people. A Duke of Badminton may associate with whomsoever he chooses. He is always, *per se*, the duke. We are not dukes. Our father made his money in—well, never mind in what. We are not even millionaires. We have enough wealth to live comfortably and like gentlemen, but not enough to roll in. If we go hand in glove with oil, tobacco, sugar, etc., we must, on account of the narrow distance which divides us from the status of commerce, sink to the level, or at least get confounded with those useful, respectable, profitable, but, to us, distasteful commodities. Therefore it behooves us to be fastidious even to a fault."

Who can blame such sentiments as these? To my mind there is a kind of shrewd nobility in them!

Why, with such sensible views on things in general, the two young men did not follow their sister's example and make brilliant matches is a matter which has never been clearly explained. When, after an immaculate career, they left Oxford, they were tall, well-built, young fellows; moreover carrying about them an inherent look of distinction. So far as the world knew they had no vices. Indeed, in spite of stature, good looks, and broad shoulders, in some quarters they were accounted milksops. Perhaps because, in addition to the polite, even courtly, style which they strove to adopt towards every one, they had many little finnicking, old-maidish ways which were a source of merriment to their contemporaries. Nevertheless, among those who were honored with their friendship, the Talberts were not unpopular. With many women—the middle-aged especially—these tall, handsome, refined young men were prime favorites. The fact of the brothers having reached the respective ages of 40 and 41 without having selected helps-meet for them argues that something which makes a marrying man was missing from their natures.

It may be that the pleasure they found in travel prevented their settling down. For many years, either together or singly, the Talberts spent nine months out of the twelve away from home. Their father, who had no wish to see his sons striving in the ruck of humanity for the world's prizes, made them handsome allowances. Greatly to their credit they lived within their incomes, even saved money. These savings they invariably invested in works of art, so that as years went by their acquisitions if united would have formed a valuable and tasteful collection, the units of which had been culled from east, west, north and south—so judiciously that the brothers felt sure that, if such a thing were needed, the selection would enhance the reputation they already enjoyed for refined tastes and knowledge of matters artistic.

The brothers were the best of friends. They understood and sympathized with each others' likes, dislikes and weaknesses. Only once in their lives had they quarrelled, but that quarrel had lasted for six years. They shudder now as they look back upon that time.

It was no vulgar dispute, which is made known to all the world and in which mutual friends are expected to take sides. It was only the Talberts themselves who knew that a quarrel existed. To outsiders they seemed more absurdly polite to each other than before.

The cause of the quarrel was the interference of one brother in the other's affairs. They were peculiar men, and very tenacious of the Englishman's duty of minding his own business. On a certain occasion one of them fancied a rather delicate matter as much his own business as his brother's. He was mistaken. They did not use high words, because such things were not in their line; but each brother was sadly firm. The upshot was that for six years they only spoke when they met in society.

At last old Talbert died. His successful daughter had been dead a long time. The old man left Hazlewood House and its contents to his sons conjointly. The rest of his fortune he divided into three parts, and left in this proportion to each of his children or their children, if any. Then the sons met at Hazlewood House and considered what they should do.

First of all, as was becoming, they made up their differences. Very little was said on either side, but it was understood that cordial relations were re-established. At which happy conclusion each man rejoiced greatly—the six years' separation had been a terrible affair—and tacitly registered a vow that for the future his brother's affairs should be his own distinct, private property.

By this time our friends had grown rather weary of gadding about. Moreover, it was due to their position that some place should be called their home. For nearly twenty years they had lived in the various capitals of Europe, and they knew that they had conquered society. Indeed, it is doubtful whether any two men, not celebrities, were better known than Horace and Herbert Talbert. So they resolved to settle down and begin housekeeping on their own account.

They collected their art treasures, and being not traders, but still thorough men of business, in order to save any question arising in the remote future, made exact inventories of their respective belongings, down to the uttermost, smallest and most cracked cup and saucer. Then they combined their collections and made Hazlewood House curiously beautiful with paintings, china and bric-a-brac. This done, they settled down into quiet domestic life, and kept their house as methodically and carefully, and no doubt a great deal better, than any two old women could have done.

Of course, with their cultivated tastes, their general acquirements, their cosmopolitan experiences, and the many desirable friends they were known to possess, the Talberts' standing in Oakbury was undeniable. They were a credit to the neighborhood, and might, had they not been too good-hearted to dream of such a proceeding, have snubbed any one of the families of position without dreading reprisals. If people laughed at their womanish ways, effeminate proceedings and domestic economies, they were, nevertheless, always glad to entertain or to be entertained by the Talberts. The latter need not be wondered at. The little dinners at Hazlewood House were the pink of culinary civilization—the crystallization of refined gastronomic intelligence.

CHAPTER III.

AN ARGUMENT AND AN ARRIVAL.

On the night when the down train carried the golden-headed child to Blacktown, the Talberts had dined at home, without company. The two men were still at the table, sipping their claret and smoking cigarettes. They were neither great drinking men nor great smoking men. If such habits are sins, the Talberts might have gone on as they were going for many years and then made atonement very easily. It is needless to state that the two brothers were faultlessly dressed in the evening garb of the nineteenth century. It will also be guessed that the dinner table was most tastefully laid out. In spite of the season being midwinter, it was gay with flowers. Quaint antique silver spoons and forks did the duty which is exacted from the florid king's pattern and the ugly fiddle pattern abominations of our day. The napery was of the whitest and finest description—the polish on the glass such as to make the most careful housewife or conscientious servant wonder and envy. There is a tale connected with the glass.

Once upon a time a lady who was dining at Hazlewood House asked her hosts, with pardonable curiosity, how they were able to induce their servants to send the decanters and wine glasses to the table in such a glorious state of refulgency. Horace Talbert smiled, and answered with exquisite simplicity:

"We should never think of trusting our glass to the hands of servants. My brother and I see to it ourselves."

Thereupon the lady, who had marriageable sisters, and was no doubt keenly alive to the fact that her hosts were eligible bachelors, said: "It was very sweet of them to take so much trouble;" but her husband, who heard the question and the answer, burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. His was a low, coarse, commonplace mind, utterly unable to divest the ideal from the material. To such a groveling nature the picture of these two six-feet, brawny men washing and rubbing their rare and costly glass seemed intensely comical.

The Talberts showed no signs of annoyance; they even smiled gravely in response to his vulgar mirth; but Hazlewood House knew that person no more.

But the wretch took his revenge after the manner of his kind. Unluckily, in spite of his faults, his position in the county was not to be despised, and more unluckily he possessed a certain amount of humor of the low class. He was brutal enough to nickname our friends the "Tabbies," and, appropriate or not, the name clung to them, and will cling for ever and ever. This is but another proof of how careful a man should be in the selection of his friends.

Although to-night the glass was as radiant as ever, there was at present no one to admire it save its owners and caretakers. By virtue of his year of seniority, Horace Talbert sat at the head of the table. Herbert was at his right hand. The two brothers were strangely alike both in figure and face. They were brown-haired men, with long, straight noses, calm, serious eyes, rather arched eyebrows, and average foreheads. Each wore a well-kept beard and mustache, the beard clipped close, and terminating in a point at the chin—a fashion which suited their long, oval faces remarkably well, and, perhaps, added a kind of old-world courtliness to their general appearance. Their looks may be summed up by saying that the Talberts were men who one felt ought to possess a picture gallery of distinguished ancestors. The absence of such a desirable possession seemed a heartless freak of nature.

The room in which the brothers were sitting was furnished with a bold mixture of modern and antique. Where comfort and utility were the first consideration, the modern prevailed; where ornament or decoration had to be supplied, the antique, often the grotesque antique, was called into requisition. On the high, carved mantelpiece stood Oriental bronze vases with hideous dragons creeping round them, and gaping, grinning kylins, who looked mockingly and fearlessly at the fierce metal monsters. They knew—old china figures know more than people suspect—that the dragons were welded to their vases more irrefragibly than Prometheus to his rock.

Here and there was a plate of rich-colored *doissonne* enamel, a piece of Nankin china, a specimen of old brass work, a bracket of real old carved oak, an antique lamp, or some other article dear to the collector. Some half a dozen medium-sized but valuable paintings hung upon the walls. The floor was covered by a sober-hued Persian carpet, and of course a roaring fire filled the grate.

The Talberts looked very grave—as grave and solemn as Roman fathers in high debate. They were, indeed, discussing a weighty matter. After an interval of silence, Herbert rose and walked to his brother's side. The two looked critically down the table. They went to the bottom and looked up the table. They went to the sides and looked across the table; they even sent glances diagonally from corner to corner.

"It is certainly a great improvement," said Horace, with quiet triumph.

"It is certainly a great improvement," said Horace.

"A great improvement," echoed the other. "Echo" is the right word—even their voices were alike.

In a contented frame of mind they resumed their seats, their claret, and their cigarettes. The great improvement was this:

For some time past these excellent housekeepers had been sorely exercised by the conventional way in which laundresses fold table cloths. They did not like the appearance of the three long creases on the snowy expanse. They turned their inventive abilities to account, and a week ago walked down to the residence, redolent of soap and hot water, of the woman who did the washing, and startled the poor creature out of her wits by insisting upon their table cloths being folded in a new and improved fashion. They even demonstrated their meaning by a practical experiment, and so impressed the nymph of the wash tub and mangle with the importance they attached to the matter that she had actually managed to learn her lesson well enough for the result of their teaching to give them great satisfaction.

Coffee was brought in, and the two gentlemen were about to leave the dining room, when the Rev. Mr. Mordle was announced. Mr. Mordle was the curate of Oakbury, and always a welcome guest at Hazlewood House. It was an unspoken axiom of the Talberts that the church set the seal of fitness upon her servants, or at least upon her upper servants. Organ blowers, parish clerks and pew openers were the lower servants—so, all things being equal, a clergyman could always break through the exclusiveness which reigned at Hazlewood House. Mr. Mordle was clever in his way, full of talk, and of course knew every in and out of the parish, in the administration to the wants of which he must have found the Talberts a great assistance. All great men have their weaknesses—perhaps their friendship for Mr. Mordle was the Talberts' weakness. But then they dearly loved having a finger in the parochial pie, leaving out of the question the fact that they liked the curate, and in the kindness of their hearts pitied his loneliness. So he often dropped in like this, uninvited, and no doubt felt the privilege to be a great honor.

On Mr. Mordle's side, he could thoroughly appreciate humor, the more so when its existence was quite unsuspected by the sedate humorist. To him the study of Horace and Herbert was a matter of keen and enduring delight.

They rose and greeted him. "Excuse me," said Horace rather nervously, "did——"

"Yes, I did," answered the curate briskly. "I rubbed them—I scrubbed them—my feet feel red hot. I could dance a minuet on your tablecloth without soiling it."

The redundancy of the answer set their minds at rest. The bugbear of their domestic lives was persons entering their rooms without having first wiped their shoes as every Christian gentleman should. The hall door was so heavily armed with mats and scrapers that such an omission seemed an impossibility. Yet sometimes it did occur, and its effects were terrible—almost tragic.

Horace rang for more claret; Herbert passed his cigarette case, and the three men chatted for a while on various subjects. Presently said Horace with sad decision:

"Ann Jenkins came to us the day before yesterday. She told a piteous tale. We gave her five shillings."

"Very good of you," said the curate; "she has a large family—nine, I think."

"Yes, but we are sorry now that we gave the money. We are sure she is not a careful, thrifty woman."

The curate's eyes twinkled. He knew Ann Jenkins well—too well.

"Careful and thrifty people wouldn't want your half-crowns. But how did you find out her true character?"

Mr. Mordle expected to hear a mournful account of a domiciliary visit to Ann Jenkins, and a dissertation upon the various and almost original stages of untidiness in which his friends had found her numerous progeny. But the truth was better than he had bargained for.

"We walked behind her across the field this morning," said Horace, with grave regret. "When she got over the stile we saw she had on two odd stockings, a black one and a gray one—or blue and gray, I am not certain which."

"Blue and gray," said Herbert, "I noticed particularly."

"Her tastes, like yours," said the curate, "may be cultured enough to avoid Philistinic uniformity."

"Oh dear, no," said Herbert, seriously. "We argue in this way. The woman has two pairs of stockings——"

"I doubt it," said the curate. "But never mind—go on." His friends were surpassing themselves!

"She has two pairs—one gray, the other blue or black. She has worn one stocking into holes. Instead of sitting down and darning it, like a decent body, she simply puts on one of the other pair."

"Why doesn't she put on the other pair altogether?" asked Mr. Mordle.

"Because," said Horace, triumphantly, "one stocking of that pair is in the same dilapidated condition; so her conduct is doubly bad. As I said, she is not a deserving woman."

"Granting your premises," said Mr. Mordle, "your argument is not illogical. Your reasoning appears sound, your deductions correct. But——"

The curate was preparing for a delicious battle on this subject, well worn or otherwise, of Ann Jenkins' hose: He meant to learn why one stocking of either pair should wear out before its fellow, and many other fanciful combinations were forming themselves in his subtle brain, when the interest in the mended or unmended stockings was extinguished by the entrance of the Talberts' irreproachable-looking man-servant. He informed his masters that the man had brought the child.

"What man? What child?" asked Horace. "Do you expect a man or a child, Herbert?"

"Certainly not. What do you mean, Whittaker?"

"A railway man has brought a child, sir. He says it is to be left here."

"There must be some stupid mistake."

"No doubt, sir," said Whittaker, respectfully, but showing that his opinion quite coincided with his masters."

"Where is the man?" asked Horace.

"In the hall, sir."

"Did he wipe his shoes?" asked Herbert, in dread.

"Certainly, sir; I insisted upon his doing so."

"We had better see the stupid man and set the matter right," said Horace. "Excuse us for a moment, Mr. Mordle."

The two tall men walked into the hall, leaving Mr. Mordle to chuckle at his ease. Hazlewood House was certainly a most interesting place this evening. It was lucky for the curate that he indulged in his merriment with his face turned from the door, as in a minute the respectable Whittaker entered the room. That functionary was most tenacious that due respect should be shown to his masters. Most probably the look of vivid amusement on Mr. Mordle's features would, had he seen it, have made an enemy for life of the faithful Whittaker.

"Mr. Talbert and Mr. Herbert would be glad if you would step out for a moment, sir."

Thereupon Mr. Mordle went into the hall and saw a most comical sight—the solemnity of the actors concerned not being the least comical part of it. Standing sheepishly on the door mat, or rather on one of the legion of door mats, was a stolid-faced porter in his uniform of brown fustian, velveteen, or whatever they call the stuff. On either side of the massive, oblong hall-table stood one of the Talberts, while between them, on the table itself, was a child with a mass of tumbled, flossy, golden hair streaming down from under a natty little cap. Horace and Herbert, each armed with his horn-rimmed eyeglass, and with looks of utter consternation and bewilderment upon their faces, were bending down and inspecting the child.

To Mr. Mordle's imaginative mind, the group suggested a picture he had once seen of the Brobdignagians taking stock of Gulliver; nor could the picture have been in any way spoiled when he himself, a tall man, went to one end of the table, while Whittaker, another tall man, stood at a becoming distance from the other end, and joined in the scrutiny of the diminutive stranger.

"This is a most extraordinary thing!" said Horace. "The child is sent by rail addressed here."

Mr. Mordle read the ticket: "H. Talbert, Esq., Hazlewood House, Oakbury, near Blacktown."

"Where did you say it came from?" asked Herbert, turning to the stolid-faced porter. "Let us hear all about it again."

"Guard of five o'clock down, gentlemen; he says child was left in first-class carriage. Mother got out at Didcot, and missed the train or didn't come back. Guard told me to get cab and bring the child here. Said I'd be paid well for my trouble. Cab was three and six, gentlemen."

"There must be some mistake. What are we to do?" asked the brothers.

"Don't expect any visitors, I suppose?" asked the curate.

"None whatever. You must take the child away again," said Horace, turning to the porter. The man gaped.

"What am I to do with it, sir?" he asked.

"Lost parcels office," suggested Mr. Mordle quietly. Whittaker gave him a reproachful look. The matter was too serious a one for jest.

"Cut the label off," was the curate's next piece of advice. "There may be a letter under it."

They took it off. The label was a piece of writing paper gummed on to a plain card which had been torn or cut irregularly. No letter was concealed beneath it. Then they searched the pockets of the child's little coat, but found nothing. Their perplexity increased.

"I'll wish you good evening, gentlemen," said the porter. "Cab was three and six." The "Tabbies" were on the horns of a dilemma. The eyes which could detect the discrepancy in the unfortunate Mrs. Jenkins' stockings were able to see that the baby was well, even very well, clad. It was just possible that a letter had miscarried—possible that some one was coming to Hazlewood House without invitation or notice—that she had really missed the train at Didcot; that she would arrive in the course of an hour or two and explain matters. The safest plan was to keep the child for a while.

Having settled this, Horace fished five shillings out of his pocket and sent the porter away happy. Thereupon Herbert produced a half crown which he handed to his brother, who pocketed it without comment and as a matter of course. They were not miserly men, but made a point of being just and exact in their dealings with one another down to the uttermost farthing. Much annoyance would be saved if all men were the same as the Talberts with respect to small sums. Nevertheless, this rigid adjustment of matters pecuniary was a trait in their characters which greatly tickled Mr. Mordle.

All the while the little boy, with fat sturdy legs placed well apart, stood upon the great oak hall table. The lantern of many colored glass over his head threw rich, warm tints on his sunny hair. He seemed in no way shy or terrified; indeed, if any fault could be found in his bearing, it was that his manners were more familiar than such a short acquaintance justified. As the dignified brothers once more bent over him to resume their examination, he seized Mr. Herbert's watch chain in his chubby fist and laughed delightedly—a laugh which Mr. Mordle echoed. He had long looked for a suitable excuse for expressing his feelings in this way. The situation was so funny. An unknown child foisted upon his friends at this hour of the night! No dirty beggar's brat, but a pretty, well-dressed little boy, old enough to possess a row of tiny white teeth, but not, it seemed, old enough to give any explanation of this unwarrantable intrusion. The child had such large, bright blue eyes, such wonderful golden hair, such fearless and confident ways, that Herbert, who was fond of children, patted the bright head and pulled out his watch that the little rascal might hear it tick; while Mordle slipped back to the dining room and returned with a couple of unwholesome macaroons.

"Nearest way to a child's heart through the stomach," he said, as the youngster deserted his first friend for the sake of the sweets.

Horace eyed these advances discontentedly. "But what is to be done?" he said.

Just then the muffled strains of a piano passed through the closed door of the drawing room.

"I should think," said the curate, "you had better take Miss Clauson's advice on the subject."